Using Culturally Diverse Picture Books in the Classroom: Exploring Culture, Language and Identity

YOSHI BUDD

It’s exciting to think about the range of possible uses of culturally diverse literature in early childhood and primary classrooms and I experience a sense of excitement and anticipation every time I open a new picture book and hear the rustling, scrunchy sound of pages turning. There are now more picture books than ever before and choosing one book over another is not easy. Teachers have had a wide range of experiences to draw from when selecting books for particular purposes, but young children do not always know when to read carefully, which parts of the text to pay attention to, or even why they are reading a particular text. This means that selecting a text appropriate to children’s developmental abilities and interests is not enough if the learning goal is to develop their abilities in purposeful reading.

Listed below are a few picture books that can be used with young readers in the classroom for the purpose of exploring the connections between identity, time and place. Even though culture is a complex concept, a good quality picture book can gently take the young reader beyond pure sensory stimulation and the novelty of seeing and hearing new things, to explore why we do things, why we think the way we do, and why it is okay to be the same and different at the same time. Children’s social conscience and empathy for others can be gradually awakened or developed by narratives that explore social issues and human relationships.

Narrative styles and traditions both represent and shape the way people think about culture and place. *Mi-Tjiwilirr I Wulumen Tullt: Hairy Cheeky Yam and Old Man Tullt* (Wadeye Aboriginal Languages Centre, 2003) has an accompanying audio recording of voices of Marri Ngarr elders, who share the ancestral knowledge of the Marri Amu Rak Tjindi Malimanhdhi peoples of the Northern Territory. Memories of this story have been passed down through song and dance across generations from grandfathers and fathers to their children. Knowledge of such stories brings the land alive and establishes a relationship and history between Aboriginal Australians and the land on which they live, promoting a sense of belonging, community and responsibility. This story represents a narrative culture which aims to explain the genesis of a place and its relationship to the people who care for it. At the back of the book, totems such as the mangrove worm and the jungle fowl are listed, along with a Marri Amu word list, a map of the country, and information on Marri Amu pronunciation.

One good reason for teachers to select a picture book is because it supports children’s understanding of the theme or topic being taught. For example, when I teach a unit on the weather, *Monsoon* (Krishnaswami & Akib, 2003) might be a possible inclusion. I imagine this is common practice, as in primary classrooms I visit, I notice that there are a large selection of picture books in the reading corner and all the picture books are related to the theme of the unit being taught at the time. Basing picture book selection on a broad theme is a useful way to deepen student learning by providing multiple perspectives on, and experiences of, that theme.

I don’t always pick the latest picture book. Picture books about ‘far away’ cultures, such as *A Country Far Away* (Gray & Dupasquier, 1988), can introduce children to new words, new lifestyles, and different ways of doing the same things. One of the dangers of teaching with picture books is to overemphasise points of difference. It is important to also engage students in discussions about similarities and possible shared experiences.

Identity, language, and culture also need to be explored in terms of change: changes over time and changes to place, or changes from one place to another. The picture book *Mirror* (Baker, 2010) shows two boys and their families living parallel lives which are very different, as they are shaped by the places, time and cultures in which they live. Nevertheless, they are connected through their shared experiences of belonging and home. The role of the classroom teacher is to avoid overgeneralising and making assumptions about other cultures and instead to encourage connections between their students and the text. Ask questions such as, ‘I wonder what it would be like to live in this place or time?’ or, ‘Would you like to live like this? Why? Why not?’ In discussions of different places and
cultures it is important to avoid a deficit discourse, often prefaced by the phrase, ‘Aren’t you lucky that …?’, or a consumerist discourse signalled by negative statements such as, ‘They don’t even have …’. These phrases tend to occur when talking about ‘otherness’ and they can create the impression that non-Western cultures or non-mainstream identities are seen as wanting in some way.

One way to explore and value the different places and spaces that shape students’ lives and identities is to share the picture book Belonging (Baker, 2004). This book can be useful for stimulating conversations on changes to the same place or space over time by talking about memories and thinking about possible futures: how children have changed their rooms, how children would like to change the school’s playground, or how something that looks big now (such as a swing or a pair of pants in the cupboard) might look smaller as they grow up. Using picture books to draw out children’s own narratives of place and belonging is important as not all children live in the suburbs (as is the setting for Belonging), or live in the same place for a long time. Just as it is important to talk about change as part of a shared experience: sometimes change is wanted and sometimes it’s not.

Picture books about people and place, such as My Place (Wheatley & Rawlins, 2008) or Herman and Rosie (Gordon, 2013), encourage children to explore their sense of belonging and identity by talking about their relationship to places they inhabit and how their sense of identity changes as they interact with different people, in different ways, in different places and spaces. Picture books that explore relationships and identity encourage children to vicariously experience discrimination or social awkwardness and help them to develop empathy for and acceptance of those who are different in some way. The Ugly Duckling (Furukawa, 2006) is a classic example. In some picture books, images and words work together to support children’s understanding of and engagement with the narrative. In others, words tell one story, while the pictures extend the story in more subtle ways. The front cover of Herman and Rosie, for example, creates a humorous context for exploring belonging and identity issues, as a crocodile and an antelope negotiate their place in New York.

Children need authentic contexts for understanding and talking about culture. They need to understand that culture is a fluid concept that changes over time and influences the ways people, families, communities and nations interact with each other. The Whispering Cloth (Shea & Riggio, 1995) is a beautifully illustrated book that narrates the significance of needlework for the Hmong people. It includes a short glossary to encourage a word focus and a map of Hmong homelands and the refugee camp, where the story is located. This picture book can be used to talk about how the collective memories of the Hmong people are recorded in pieces of cloth. Students can be encouraged to reflect on how they can best record important collective memories that create the ‘fabric’ or culture of their family life.

The concept of culture can be explored as a set of shared practices that draw people together. These practices also create subcultures that influence what is acceptable for particular groups within that culture. Whispering Cloth (Shea & Riggio, 1995) focuses on a social practice that is undertaken by Hmong women only. As young children are sensitised to gender roles from a very early age, cultural and gender stereotypes need to be explored and challenged. Who’s in a Family (Skutch & Nienehaus, 1995) explores the many different ways of understanding and being part of a family, and Piggybook (Browne, 2008) explores a woman’s place in the family. Oliver Button is a Sissy (dePaola, 1979) and Ballerino Nate (Brubaker Bradley & Alley, 2006) are stories of boys who stay true to themselves and continue their love of dance, and William’s Doll (Zolotow, 1972) presents a boy’s nurturing tendencies as a natural and positive attribute. There are many picture books that challenge traditional narratives of family and gender roles. These can be used for the purpose of promoting tolerance and open-mindedness and creating a safe, inclusive space that encourages students to share and engage with a wide ranges of hobbies and interests.

Children need a sense of purpose for learning and it is important to connect students’ cultural learning to other subjects. One Leaf Rides the Wind (Davidson Mannis & Hartung, 2002) is a counting and poetry book for young children. Set in Japan, each number forms part of a haiku that describes cultural imagery and artefacts such as bonsai, shih tzu temple dogs, and the tea ceremony. These are explained in a short information text at the bottom of each page. This book can be used for multiple purposes, but in the context of identity, language and culture, it can be used to explore how language represents experiences of place. The brevity of haiku forces the poet to select the most meaningful words to express the impact of an experience. Children can be asked to describe something special they have seen, smelt, felt, heard or tasted and select the ten most important words to put into a haiku. In this way, language can be used to heighten awareness of things that matter and words that matter, at a particular point in time and space.

An important aspect of any culture is the language that holds it together. A shared way of speaking and thinking about the world can lead
to a sense of belonging to a particular group. In culturally diverse classrooms it is important to consider how we often use language in ways that don’t make sense unless you are an ‘insider’. Just think about some of the idioms used in the classroom, such as: ‘Jump to it’, ‘Cat got your tongue?’ ‘It’s not my cup of tea’. Sharing idioms used at home can be a lot of fun in the classroom. The strong word focus encourages students from non-mainstream cultures to extend their language skills while at the same time learn about Australian culture. This provides the teacher with important insight into students’ language backgrounds. A discussion of idioms and ‘Aussie slang’, often passed down from generation to generation, can create an inclusive learning environment where children can share common sayings from home.

The books I select for classroom use are not always recent releases or award winners. Text choice is often determined by access and availability so it’s important to remember that it’s not the book, it’s the way that you use it, that matters. Nevertheless, I am also mindful that good quality, culturally diverse picture books in the classroom can effectively promote positive social values and attitudes.

**Children’s literature**


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Contributions can be emailed to the co-editors: Louise Phillips louise.phillips@uq.edu.au and Linda Willis l.willis@uq.edu.au

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**Yoshi Budd** has a teaching background in primary and secondary English-literacy and Languages Other Than English. She is currently a lecturer in the International Graduate Centre for Education at Charles Darwin University and Theme Leader for educational research in the areas of identity, language and culture. Email: Yoshi.Budd@cdu.edu.au

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